

Houston's Academic Enclaves: Four Campuses in Three Acts

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Despite the enduring sanctity of American individualism, those who are fortunate enough to attend a major university participate in an exceptional atmosphere of collective life. The college campus, a parklike setting for buildings with high architectural standards, reflects the sense of propriety and elite identity of this transitory academic community. In many ways the contemporary university resembles the social order of the ancient Greek polis, or city-state: the university councils and boards of trustees, the review processes of faculty committees, the constant evaluation by teachers of their students and by students of their teachers, the regular production of public lectures and performances all contribute to a climate of vigilant critique, dialogue, and mutual awareness within the restricted confines of the campus. The university enclave arguably provides the most participatory and direct political experience that college-educated people will ever encounter.

As with the ancient polis, the nature of campus politics can range from democratic to autocratic to theocratic. But whatever its ideological tinge, the limited population and the high degree of participation ensure that the university behaves as a collective body. Plato recommended 5,020 citizens as the proper size for his ideal, proto-fascist polis, while Aristotle would allow for twice that number, reasoning it to be the limit of people one could recognize in a lifetime. Today, after the great period of university expansion of the 1960s and 1970s, the largest American student bodies have reached a plateau of 30,000 to 40,000 (about the same number as those who had citizen's rights in Athens at the time of Pericles). Compared to European or Latin American universities, which often have 10,000 students enrolled in a single department, these are still relatively small student populations.

The American college campus, starting with Thomas Jefferson's "academical village" at the University of Virginia, has been charged with a utopian mandate: to vindicate the ideal of a self-contained rural alternative to the city. Since the 1950s, university-trained elites with a preference for living in the suburbs have exported the campus model to new enclave environments such as corporation headquarters or congregate living communities, while stripping it of its critical dimension. The appeal of the university campus is no doubt partly aesthetic — the built environment is treated as a single, well-planned landscape — and partly environmental, since most campuses are exemplary, verdant pedestrian zones, planned with the criterion of no greater than a 15-minute walk between buildings. No matter how innocent it might appear, however, the true appeal of the campus model derives from an insidious exclusionary agenda that is antithetical to the civil liberties of the city. Elites are attracted to the class homogeneity that they felt in college and seek to perpetuate it for their working and living environments. From the high-minded polis of the university, the various spinoffs of the campus tend to become defense-conscious mini-police states, places that are anathema to the free exchange of the city.

The proliferation of campuslike enclaves generates a patchwork kind of urban fabric full of inaccessible zones. Houston during the past three decades has become a crazy quilt of limited-access, neofeudal domains that include such corporate environments as Cullen

Center and Houston Center in the heart of downtown, Greenway Plaza and the Galleria near Loop 610, and the Fluor and Compaq headquarters in the outer districts, as well as the aggregate of health institutions at the Texas Medical Center and the formidable series of master-planned communities such as Cinco Ranch and First Colony in the city's hinterland. While the transfer of the college campus model to other programs enhances the efficiency of production and the loyalty of dependents, there can be no doubt that it also legitimates a new form of social segregation that keeps the riffraff beyond the hedges. Enclaving has led to the production of some handsome landscapes, such as Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo's Conoco headquarters, ringed with its heroic sun visors and set in a mosquito-free moat. But such well-defended monofunctional compounds, while they might make sense in terms of company productivity objectives, create formidable obstacles in the urban pattern and contradict the public nature of the city.

The four major university campuses in Houston (Rice University, the University of Houston, Texas Southern University, and the University of St. Thomas), each about three to four miles from downtown yet far enough inside Loop 610 to be considered part of the so-called "inner city," occupy sizable swathes of the city. The Rice campus is about half the size of the entire downtown area, while the combined campuses of UH and TSU, which are nearly adjacent to each other, are almost the same size as downtown. The universities are comparable in size to preindustrial city-states and set the example for the first ring of neofeudal enclaves in the city. At all four campuses, recent

planning decisions and architectural additions encourage a stiffening of the university enclave, reinforcing boundaries and in some cases closing public through streets in order to assert the autonomy of the campus as a landscape while reducing the possibilities of casual interactions with the city.

ACT I

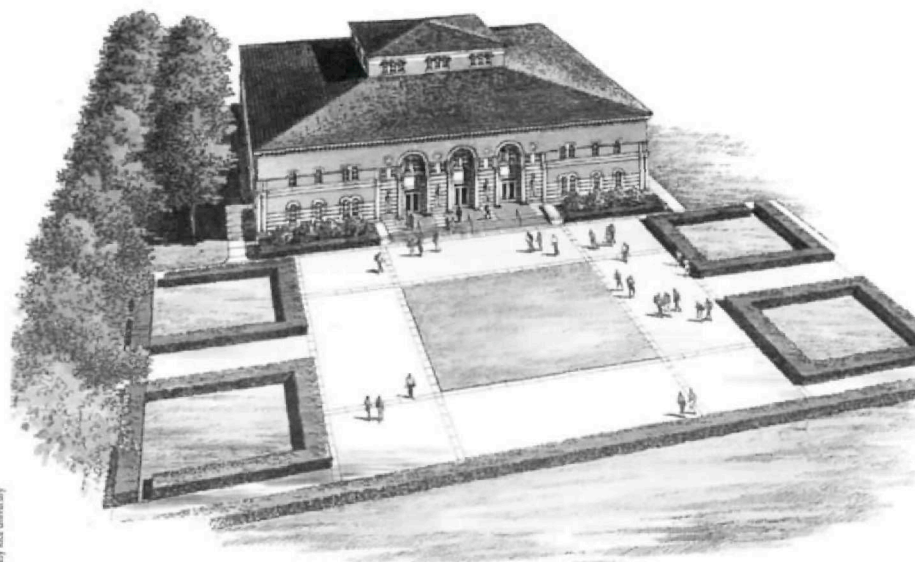
WILLIAM MARSH RICE UNIVERSITY

William Marsh Rice University, the most prestigious and oldest college in the city, possesses one of the most admired campuses in the country. As a small, extremely selective institution it is close to Plato's recommendations in scale, with a little more than 4,000 students. Rice has followed a course of slow growth and fairly coordinated expansions since the first general plan (1910) by Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson. The two initial

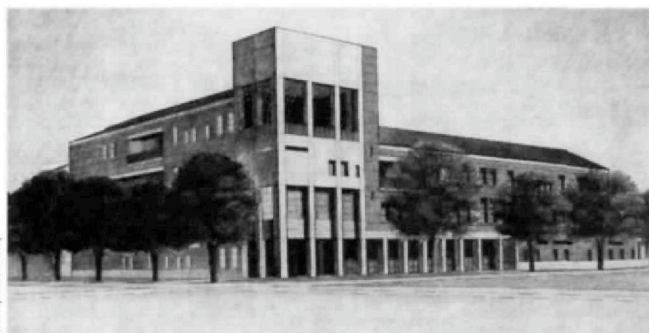
Mediterranean-style buildings by Ralph Adams Cram and the accompanying landscape of oak-lined axes established a commanding language of narrow, brick-faced, arcaded volumes arranged in courtyards and connected by tree-lined paths — a lexicon that has rarely been contradicted in successive building campaigns.

In 1983, Cesar Pelli, who had already been engaged as the architect of Herring Hall, built to house the graduate school of administration, was asked to produce a new master plan to update the original, and in it he specifically insisted that the new additions conform to the original language. Although Pelli's plan was only a set of recommendations, it has been followed fairly assiduously in the siting and massing of subsequent new buildings including Mechanical Engineering (1985); Pelli's addition to the Rice Memorial Center (1987); Ricardo Bofill's Alice Pratt Brown Hall for the Shepherd School of Music (1991); Cambridge Seven Associates' biosciences and bioengineering building, George R. Brown Hall (1991); Thomas Beeby's James A. Baker Institute for Public Policy (under construction); and John Outram's Computational Engineering Building (under construction). The only additions that were not anticipated in Pelli's plan are Antoine Predock's Center for Nanoscale Science (under construction), set adjacent to the Space Science Building, and the new police department headquarters (1992) across from the Media Center, an anonymous tilt-up building that guards the only campus entrance open after 2 a.m.

Most of the new commissions at Rice involved the selection of an internationally known architect, a practice that began



James A. Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, Hammond, Beeby & Babka, architects (completion 1997).



Courtesy Rice University



Courtesy Rice University

Top: Center for Nanoscale Science and Technology, Rice University, Antoine Predock, architect (completion late 1997).

Above: Computational Engineering Building, Rice University, John Outram Associates, architects (completion 1996).

with the addition to the School of Architecture by Stirling & Wilford (1981). The Board of Governors' building and grounds committee from 1979 to 1994 was presided over with charming determination by Josephine Abercrombie, whose own real estate interests included an unbuilt project by Cesar Pelli and the development of Cinco Ranch. The taste for historicist details found in the Bofill, Beeby, Outram, and Cambridge Seven projects can be traced as much to Abercrombie's personal postmodernist inclinations as to the inherently conservative nature of the campus plan.

In addition to Pelli's plan, Rice is guided by a general landscaping plan, submitted in 1990 in anticipation of the Economic Summit of Industrialized Nations by Stuart Dawson of Sasaki Associates. Like Pelli's plan, the landscaping suggestions sensibly build on the existing patterns of tree-lined axes, strengthening the courts and edges, and projecting to the eventual greening of the vast stadium parking lot. Additional gates and thickened perimeter hedges are among the suggestions being acted upon. Dawson's planting scheme subtly strengthens the primacy of the inner loop road and emphasizes the intersections of the three secondary cross axes of the original plan, both of which instill a superb system of orientation. One of the recommendations in Pelli's plan that has yet to be fulfilled is the tracing of an outer loop road just inside the hedges for services such as food delivery.

Another idea that could be easily acted upon would be to provide articulated bike paths like those at Stanford University, an improvement that could become a model to extend to the surrounding neighborhoods. While two of the new buildings on campus will include showers as an incentive to those who brave pedaling to work in 100-degree weather, there is currently no plan for bike paths or bike parking, and nei-

ther Rice nor any of the city's universities has cooperated with the various municipally backed plans for city bike paths that have attracted federal funding during the past three years. Likewise Rice could be much more involved in the city's public transportation programs: would it be so barbaric to allow Metro buses to drop people off close to the center of campus? Rice is one of the few places in Houston where planning has had positive results. If the university took the initiative to offer well-organized transportation options such as bike paths and bus programs, it could greatly influence the rest of the city toward weaning itself from the automobile.

Since 1988, Dean Currie, Rice's vice-president for finance and administration, has been the pivotal player in negotiations between Abercrombie's committee, the donors (who of course have a significant say in determining the architectural products), the celebrity architects, the local support architects, and the institutions that must be served. Rice's planning succeeded because both clients and consultants were educated about the needs, traditions, and goals of the campus. Currie maintains that it is Rice's desire to hire the best possible architects to represent the specific moment of architectural discourse, while encouraging use of the existing campus language, in the hope that the architectural results will "elicit strong criticism while contributing to a coherently great collection of buildings." This strategy of balance has produced a very subtle kind of growth in which nondescript buildings such as Mechanical Engineering, or overly expressive designs such as Bofill's and Outram's, are subsumed in an overall context, a consequence of the formal power of the landscaping and the unifying texture of St. Joe brick. The recently unveiled drawing for Predock's Center for Nanoscale Science, which displays very subtle asymmetries in the placement of the fenestra-

tion but almost obsequiously reiterates the typological and material palette of the other Rice buildings, is a case in point of the strength of the campus's conventionality in disciplining the most nonconformist of architects. Rice has been expanding in an organic and seemingly inevitable manner that forces both stodgy and avant-garde architects to be deferential.

ACT II UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

By contrast, the University of Houston is a much larger, public institution that is currently suffering from state budget cuts and using most of its building funds for deferred maintenance. UH is by definition less selective than Rice in its enrollment, with a student body at the main campus about eight times the size of Rice's, one of the largest in the country. Aside from its central campus it has branches downtown (currently undergoing an impressive expansion of 600,000 square feet), at Clear Lake City, and in

Victoria. Due to the lack of strong orientation patterns and the absence of formal landscape devices, the diversity of buildings on the UH campus tends to be exaggerated, and architects have further accentuated this with their mismatched choices of volumes, cladding, and fenestration, making the campus appear as exogenous as a world's fair. To the same degree that Rice displays a concerted aristocratic cohesion, UH conveys the open, awkward, and inharmonious tendencies of democracy.

The initial plan for the Settegast-Taub donation of 110 acres of land, prepared in 1937 by the St. Louis landscaping firm of Hare & Hare (authors of a never-



Courtesy University of Houston

Athletics/Alumni Center, University of Houston, HOK Sports Facilities Group, architects (1995).



Courtesy University of Houston

John and Rebecca Moores School of Music, University of Houston, The Mathes Group, architects (completion spring 1997).

adopted 1929 city plan for Houston), seems to have emulated the organization of the Rice plan. The administration building, the Ezekiel Cullen Building, was placed at the head of an entry axis, followed by a loop road lined with parallel buildings. A minor cross axis on the south was left for a courtyard of student residential halls. Unfortunately the primary axis of the plan was directed in the short, east-west dimension of the site, and the subsequent growth was forced along an informal lateral axis to the north. In 1966, when the campus was replanned by Caudill Rowlett Scott, the roadways through the campus were eliminated and some of the implied cross axes of the original plan were blocked, confounding any clear axial orientation. Automobiles currently must skirt the perimeter of the campus and are only allowed to penetrate it at the edges.

A persistent ambiguity plagues UH: is the campus entrance located at the original site, off Calhoun Road, or is it to be approached from Cullen Boulevard, which is closer to downtown? The construction of the Gulf Freeway in 1952 created a strong attraction to Cullen Boulevard and the northern side of the campus, where Philip Johnson's Architecture Building (1987), a smug simulacrum of C.-N. Ledoux's 18th-century design for a House of Education, now greets freeway motorists, its redundant tempietto competing with billboards for cheap motels and vasectomy reversals. SWA's Kevin Shanley was asked in the mid-eighties to improve the freeway approach to Cullen Boulevard with a significant threshold. The resulting split obelisk, whose elements on either side of the road are joined at the top by laser beams, appears like a stranded relic of postmodern carnival ephemera, attempting to establish an axial order that refuses to congeal.

In 1992 Gerald D. Hines was commissioned to develop a new plan for the campus, and Hines in turn hired the architectural firm of Kendall/Heaton. This most recent UH plan foresees the closing of Cullen Boulevard between Holman and Wheeler avenues, the closing of Calhoun Road, and the shifting of emphasis to the original entry axis, which will soon feed into a new freeway extension of Texas 35. By closing these streets the campus will add about 30 percent more bulk to its already formidable enclave, but the problem of internal orientation and circulation will probably be aggravated: the perimeter



University of Houston, aerial view ca. 1955, when the campus more closely adhered to the Hare & Hare plan of 1937 [see the cover of this issue].



Commuter campus: University of Houston from the Gulf Freeway. The College of Architecture, by Johnson/Burgee with Morris Aubry, architects (1987), is the most prominent building in the background.

loop for automobiles will be enlarged rather than shrunk, making the connection to the center ever more unclear. Instead of dreaming of reinventing Rice with its clear axis, UH needs remedial, adaptive strategies to tie its landscape together. One example can be found at the University of Caracas, where a variety of buildings in different modern styles are linked by freestanding porticoes that extend from the perimeter parking lots to the central spaces. These shaded paths

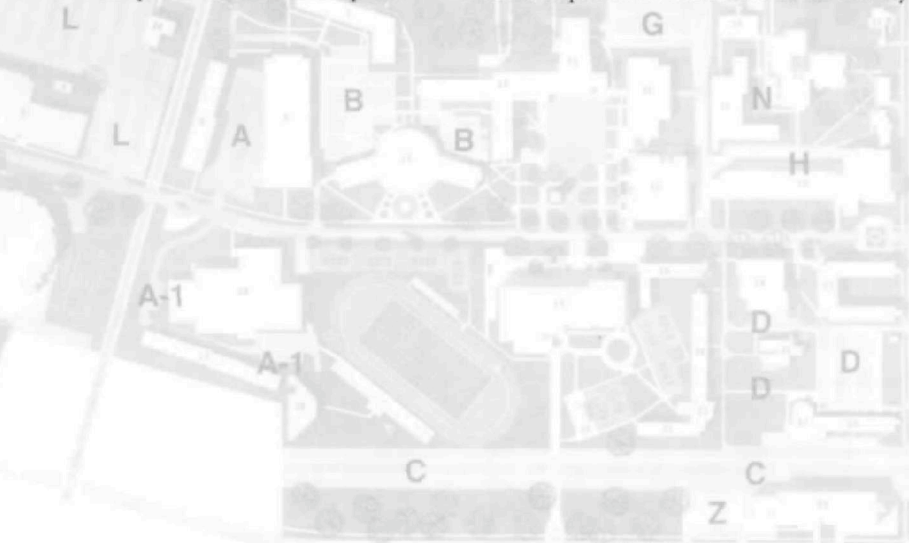
create much-needed orientation as well as social spaces; some of them are even fitted with blackboards to be used as teaching areas. As at Rice, a combination of bicycle paths and bus stops could also give a new order to the campus, making it more accessible to the rest of the city.

In 1994, UH made national news with the announcement of a \$50 million donation by Rebecca and John Moores. This type of windfall is one of the reasons why the campus does not evolve in an orderly

manner. In this case the patrons specified that the money had to be spent on sports facilities, at a time when endowments were needed for educational buildings and the clarification of the center of the campus. Later the package was reassembled to redistribute some of the donation toward the construction of a new concert hall and music school. HOK Sports, specialists in sports facilities, has already completed the Athletics/Alumni Center, with a 120-yard indoor football field simulating the conditions of the Astrodome, an indoor track and field, and, positioned triumphantly at the entry, a Cougars Hall of Fame. The façade of the enormous complex has been slathered with a tawdry postmodern portal that greatly detracts from the purity of the building's semi-elliptical shed roof, whose beauty can still be appreciated from the rear elevation. It also houses the alumni center, and attached to it is a new baseball diamond. Mary Miss, the artist commissioned to create a sculptural enhancement to this project at the intersection of Cullen and Elgin, has designed a casually arranged collection of chairs in different scales set against an ivy-covered backdrop, a vision inspired by Houston back yards. The randomness of her project echoes the democratic incoherence of the campus and offers a contextualist suggestion to campus planners as to how to perceive their inchoate collection of buildings.

Across Cullen Boulevard (the part that will remain open), Houston architect Barry Moore and The Mathes Group have designed the new building for the Moores School of Music, which will have a Baroque-scale opera theater that seats 800 (under construction). The building will be approached from the northern parking lots by a shaded entry court with amphitheater steps. Its façades will carry very low relief pilasters reminiscent of the limestone pilasters on the Ezekiel Cullen Building. Some interior decoration will be designed by Frank Stella. Neither the athletic center nor the music school counteracts the tendency for each building to have its own style and volumetric character. The music building promises to establish a more coherent arts courtyard with the Wortham Theater and the Blaffer Gallery, but there is no corresponding landscape improvement to enhance the idea.

The probable demolition of one of the only buildings on the campus that has an endearing style, the limestone-clad Technology Annex, and the possible



demolition of Jeppesen Stadium to make room for a professional-size replacement seem unnecessary sacrifices to the idea of an ever-bigger future. Bruce Webb, dean of UH's School of Architecture, offers a much more sensible direction of development, noting that since UH owns the equivalent of 16 blocks on both sides of the approach from the split obelisks to the northern parking lots on Cullen Boulevard, it might be time to consider developing this site as a sort of academic new town, comparable in scale to the Rice Village, providing a mix of residential and commercial buildings for the substantial community of 35,000 who use the campus and have housing, shopping, and other commercial needs. Such a project would generate a strong focus of orientation and would ultimately enhance the flowing, democratic nature of the campus.

Two blocks west of UH lies Texas Southern University, founded as a state-funded institution in 1947, before desegregation, as a college "for Negroes" on the model of Tuskegee Institute. It currently has a student population of 10,233, of whom 79 percent are African American. Although "for Negroes" has been dropped from its name, the institution still strives to provide higher educa-

tion for the minority that has been most excluded from the universities. Rice, which has a 22 percent minority enrollment among undergraduates, is the social inverse of TSU.

onto this axis, which is strengthened by a row of plane trees. The Greek fraternity system is particularly important at TSU, and since there are no fraternity houses, members have claimed these trees along the Wheeler axis as their meeting places, painting the trunks with the fraternity's colors and symbols. While this has not been very healthy for the trees, it has created an exceptionally colorful street scene. In the center of the campus is a paved plaza that is shaped by the tall columns of Mack H. Hannah Hall (Lamar Q. Cato, architect, 1950), the auditorium and administration building, one of the earliest buildings on the campus and by far the handsomest, rendered in Texas limestone. This was the site of Houston's only race riot during the 1960s.

Since the adoption of a master plan in 1978, TSU has torn down about 350 buildings in the adjacent neighborhood, which has tended to isolate the perimeters of the campus. Half of the student housing has been demolished as substandard and has not been replaced. Cuney Homes, the second-largest public housing complex in Houston, forms the northern border of the campus and is currently undergoing rehabilitation. The campus is in fact permeable along this shared edge, and the easy access between Cuney Homes and TSU represents what other institutions would consider a dangerous alternative to the enclosed enclave. As always, the best defense is the presence of responsible people.

TSU is directly on the itinerary of one of the four projected public bike routes in Houston, the Columbia Tap Rail-to-Trail. The potential site, which is currently awaiting public funding, would use the abandoned Houston & Columbia rail line right-of-way that runs from the beginning of State Highway 288 downtown through Third Ward to Brays Bayou, where it links up with another bike trail. TSU, midway on the route, could become a key player in facilitating this alternative form of transportation, and could supply articulated local bike paths, safe bike racks, and showers. As the poorest of Houston's universities, TSU has the least potential to make major changes by constructing buildings and the greatest potential to change things through landscape intervention.

ACT III UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

The University of St. Thomas, the smallest of Houston's university campuses, has half as many students as Rice and the lowest tuition of any private college in town. Founded in 1946 by Catholic priests of the Basilian order, the school had the good fortune to be patronized by Dominique and John de Menil, who engaged their favored architect of the time, Philip Johnson, to create one of the best works of his career, a diminutive Modernist version of Jefferson's arcaded lawn at the University of Virginia,

rendered with spindly black steel for the columns of the two-level colonnades and St. Joe brick cladding for the attached boxy volumes. For three decades this colonnade extended on the north into emptiness as a mysterious grid without attached volumes, evoking the stunning beauty of a Sol Lewitt sculpture. Only recently has a new academic building been hitched to the walkway to complete the symmetry of the court.

Construction is currently under way on what promises to be one of the silliest works of Philip Johnson's long career, a chapel that terminates the arcaded axis and cuts the court off definitively from the surroundings. A rectangular box with a small golden dome in its center, the chapel is intersected by a diagonal wall that carries carillon bells. The chapel will be entered through outward-folding flaps reminiscent of the gap at the bottom of a monk's robe. In both scale and style this frivolous design promises to overwhelm the subtle order of the original buildings, almost as if the architect were seeking revenge on himself — a perverse privilege that could only be granted to someone of Johnson's status.

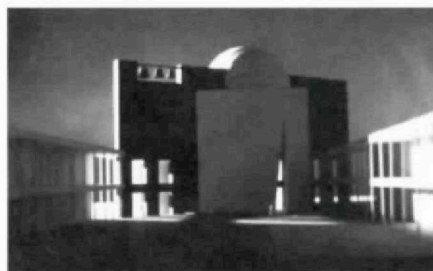
The campus of St. Thomas was surreptitiously woven into the surrounding neighborhood, integrating existing wood-framed houses with its boxy brick volumes. Unlike other campus enclaves it was truly permeable, and until recently one could drive through it on city cross streets. The new additions and street closings effected in 1996 will prevent this promiscuity. Partly because of declining



Texas Southern University fraternities have claimed trees on the Wheeler axis in the center of the campus by painting the trunks.



Street-closing "planter," University of St. Thomas on Mt. Vernon Street.



Chapel of St. Basil, University of St. Thomas, Philip Johnson, Ritchie & Fiore, architects, with Merriman Holt Architects (completion 1997). Top: View from the academic court. Above: Aerial view showing the chapel as the terminus of Johnson's academic court.



enrollments and the need to better market the school, and partly because of the initiative of Stanley Williams, the local developer of a neighboring commercial center, who thought the school grounds needed more cohesion, St. Thomas hired SWA's Kevin Shanley in the late eighties to come up with a solution for defining the campus's edges, resulting in new yellow brick fences and enclosed parking lots that demonstrate the connection of the Link House on Montrose Boulevard with the 11 city blocks that make up the campus. Since then the campus planners have closed Mt. Vernon Street, one of three cross streets that continued the city's grid through the campus. Slowly the borders are hardening, destroying what was once a pleasant ambiguity between university and neighborhood.

The university campuses in Houston are extremely important, both to the cultural quality of life of the city and as examples of planning that the city (the world's most famously unplanned one) is unable to pursue. As a client for architecture, Rice offers an extremely important process of educating both the clients and the architects about the qualities that have worked and new conditions that are emerging. But Rice represents a poor model as a participant in the city, having from the start closed itself off and insulated itself from all contact with auxiliary urban functions. The other three universities, which at times have shown a better integration with the city fabric, are now pursuing analogous isolating strategies without considering permeable alternatives. While planning bureaucrats will usually argue that defensive structure is necessary for public safety because of the threat of crime, it can be shown that the presence of people, not walls, is the best deterrent to crime. While the universities have served as the model for legitimating enclaving for other institutions, they should now seriously consider reversing that isolationist tendency for the health of the city's fabric and the survival of urban values. The best place to start is with a new attitude to public transportation and nonpolluting forms of transportation. It is here that all four campuses, blessed with young, intelligent, and idealistic populations, could shed their neofeudal attitudes and produce a sustainable model of urbanity for the rest of the city to follow. ■

Is Rice a City?

Terrence Doody



Statue of founder William Marsh Rice at the center of the Rice University campus. Fondren Library (Staub & Rather with William Ward Watkin, architects, 1949) is in the background.

Is Rice a city? This question is the topic of the second paper in English 401: *The City in Literature*, a course I have been teaching to upper-level English majors and architecture students at Rice for the last 15 years. It is a good topic because it has no answer, and the essays are usually interesting because the students are doing a couple of different things at once: organizing their sense of a city's defining characteristics and thinking about Rice in an unanticipated way as they use each of these exercises to refine the other. The syllabus for the course changes all the time, but early on every reading list are Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* and Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Mumford supplies the basic vocabulary and models, Jacobs a critique of why the abstractions that work to explain a city's history do not work to plan a city's life. It is her work that is most useful in interpreting the novels we read, his in providing the ideas necessary to establish a common ground of discourse. And, as the students learn, Mumford's ideas of the city offer Rice a number of possible identities.

With the tomb of its founder-god to center it, Rice resembles ancient cities of Mesopotamia in surprising ways. Flanked

on the east by the palace that houses the city's rulers (Lovett Hall) and on the west by the citadel that contains the treasures (Fondren Library), the tomb establishes a physical axis, a historical continuity, and a sign of Rice's entailment in more than material concerns. With the addition of the four classroom buildings, however, and the crosswalk that fulfills the cruciform, the center of Rice begins to resemble the monastic settlements of late antiquity that preserved the urban culture of the Classical world as its political orders were disintegrating. With its wall of hedges and its faculties, which originated in the guild system, Rice also resembles the medieval towns that gave rise to and grew to surround the early European universities. The tomb of the founder-god, with this shift, becomes the statue of the patron saint.

Mumford argues that cities are not simply places and populations but sites of urban order, systems of functions and relationships. The city that Rice resembles most in his scheme of things is the city Mumford values most highly, Athens. In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., Athens was small, relatively poor, distinctly secular, and specifically different from the cities of Cos, Delphi, and

Olympia. Its gymnasium, sanatorium, theater, and agora were public spaces unrelated to the citadel of centralized power. Talk in Athens was more important than money; eloquence was valuable in itself; participation in the city's processes was more important than submission to a rule.

In the most interesting essays, the students begin to understand a complexity to Rice's organization that they had not recognized. In the least interesting, they utter an easy "no" and argue that Rice in no way resembles a large modern city like Houston. With this kind of argument the undergraduates typically reveal that they have made two important decisions about Rice's nature. Many decide that only they are the population. These students argue that Rice is not a city because it has no old people, no children, no families, and no one here in the summer (which is true of Paris, of course, but they don't know this). This means, however, that in their minds there are no staff, administration, graduate students, or faculty. Intelligent as these students are, they are sometimes undistracted by experience, and their own attitude makes Rice an ivory tower. On the other hand, some decide Rice is not a city because it is too dependent on outside